

House Human Services Testimony
Vermont AIDS Services Organizations
Theresa Vezina, Executive Director, Vermont CARES
February 15, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the VT Syringe Service Programs

Syringe Service Programs (SSP) have been an integral part of harm reduction services in Vermont for decades. Vermont CARES, AIDS Project of Southern VT, HIV/HCV Resource Center, and Safe Recovery, together, serve the entire state with both onsite and mobile service programs. These organizations have built sustainable infrastructures, programming, policies, community partnerships and, most importantly, trusting relationships within the populations we serve. It has taken a combined effort of more than 30 years to build these programs and networks that saves lives every day.

Together we have expanded access to harm reduction services to all 14 counties of the state, by working with both a fixed site model and mobile service model. We are now reaching some of the most rural areas through robust mobile delivery programs, peer outreach workers and community partnerships. Mobile services are in addition to the expansive offerings at the fixed site locations and in some regions mobile programs have taken the place of traditional onsite, drop-in locations, like H2RC for instance.

There are 5 different fixed site SSP locations in VT:

- Safe Recovery in Burlington- M-F, 9-5
- VT CARES in Rutland, Barre & St. Johnsbury, M-F, 9-5
- APSVT in Brattleboro- Tuesday 10am-2pm

A breakdown of counties served by mobile programs:

APSVT- Bennington and Windham- Wed, Thurs, Friday- 9-5pm

H2RC- Windsor and Orange- M-F, 9-5pm

Safe Recovery- Based in Burlington, they are the main SSP in Chittenden County, but they also see folks who visit their location from all parts of the state.

They are getting their mobile program off the ground now. They had a delay due to shortage of vehicles during the pandemic. They are working in tandem with Vermont CARES in Franklin County offering mobile services currently.

VT CARES- Three full time fixed sites, two mobile vans serving most of Vermont except for the Bennington, Windham and Windsor and parts of Orange. Vermont CARES mobile program started in 2016, being the first one in VT, we have been able to make significant strides in the areas we cover.

Each of our agencies strive meet the needs of Vermonters who use drugs, people who are struggling with substance use disorders, at risk of overdose death, infectious diseases and more. We know lives are being lost every day and we need to do more but we also know that many more lives would be lost if it wasn't for the existing network that you have invested in for decades.

Funding for SSPs

We are so grateful for the allocation of additional funds in SFY23. These funds addressed budget shortfalls related to supply cost and staffing. We support and are happy to learn that the new total of 400K will be the ongoing base funding for SSP's.

Initially, we were going to put in a budget request for an additional 400K to replace the two federal contracts that are ending in 2023 but after I attended the Opioid Settlement Committee meeting on Feb 13th, 2023 and learned of some of the priorities the Department of Health was proposing, we have chosen to wait for the committees' recommendations. There were indications that there may be funds coming from the settlement funds that may replace the federal funds that are ending this year.

We are also anticipating, fingers crossed, that the Opioid Settlement Committee moves forward new innovative work that addresses opioid overdose deaths now, not down the road. A few of those initiatives are onsite drug checking, continuation of the Overdose Outreach worker/Peer worker pilot project, wound care support and much more.

With that said, we are pausing for now on a specific budget ask, but if things do not pan out with the settlement funds we may need to come back and ask for 400K to keep our organizations whole and operating at the current capacity. This would not allow for new services to be added or hiring additional staff but, as important, it would maintain essential services throughout the state.

Workforce

Attracting and retaining culturally sensitive staff has been a challenge for us all. Not one of our agencies has escaped the labor shortage that has hit our state, leaving our current staff overwhelmed and underpaid during a time when death rates are on the rise. We need to look at how to compensate staff fairly for doing work that is so vital to the wellbeing of so many. This work can be very rewarding but is often emotionally taxing and there is a high rate of burnout.

An especially important outcome after receiving additional funding in SFY23 for our organizations was that Vermont CARES was able to increase salaries of current staff and able to increase the starting pay range for new employees. We were also able to withstand the health

insurance increases in CY23 to maintain excellent health care benefits for our staff without increasing their contribution. In recent years we have struggled to keep staff from leaving for more pay at less demanding jobs and attracting new hires because we have not been able to increase the rates of pay since 2018. **Thank you for making this a reality for these hardworking individuals.**

Cost of SSP Operations

The cost of supplies for the SSPs rose in 2021/2022 and the number of visits to SSP's around the state almost doubled since the pandemic. Vermont CARES distributed close to a million syringes last year.

The additional funds allocated to Syringe Service Programs, HIV Care and Harm Reduction have been a godsend to the folks we work with every day and to the staff who are tirelessly meeting them where they are, both figuratively and literally.

Vermont CARES convened a meeting of the four SSP's to learn more about each of our needs individually and as a collective.

What we learned was that the combined operating budgets of all four SSP's in SFY22 was almost \$700,000 and we are each projecting increased costs in SFY23 & 24, which is why we are looking at a total ask of \$800,000 in SFY24 and beyond.

In SFY22 agency expenses were as follows. Note: These totals do not include the DSU Overdose Outreach contracts or Overdose Prevention Education contracts but does include Overdose To Action (OD2A) federal funding for VT CARES and APSV towards case mgt. staff at the SSP

- Safe Recovery \$253,000
- VT CARES \$218,000
- HIV/HCV Resource Center \$100,000
- AIDS Project of Southern VT \$76,000

With additional funding, syringe service programs will be able to sustain current operations, expand on their existing services and coverage of geographic areas through hiring more staff, expand the peer outreach worker model, build new innovative collaborations with community partners to support greater access through micro sites, provide more overdose prevention education and Narcan distribution, offer free HIV and HCV testing.

Our Wish List

- Nurses - If additional settlement funds are approved; we'd like to bring back visiting nurses on site for expanding wound care and connections for treatment and other health care needs. This is to replace one component of the services that were being offered during a yearlong pilot with Better Life Partners, where low barrier, rapid access to MAT services were embedded in SSP's. Both VT CARES and APSVT were part of that very successful program. It sadly ended Dec. 31, 2022.

- Onsite Drug checking – This is a high priority for all SSPs and we hope to see that this year. It is one way we can have an immediate and positive impact on the fatal overdose rates. AIDS Project of Southern Vermont is piloting a program now with Brandis MADDs Project and other SSPs have been talking with participants who say they would utilize this service and feel it would help save lives.
- Immunity - One concern that VT CARES brought up at the Opioid Settlement meeting during public comment in support of onsite drug checking was to ensure immunity for agencies, staff and participants bringing in samples to be tested. This would be in the same category as the Good Samaritan law. There is a draft billing coming on this, please consider supporting this type of decriminalization.

There are over 80 years of combined experience within the current SSP network. When you invest in us, you know that we are implementing evidence-based best practices, have built trusting relationships in some of the hardest to reach populations, and have long histories of success doing this work. We are poised and ready to put these dollars to work right away.

Here a few messages that participants have shared with us recently:

“Thank you for getting back to me and meeting me. Buddy just told me the test came back positive, so I am pretty sure you just saved multiple lives!” (Friend of participant)

“You are such an amazing organization, and you really save a lot of lives here. Like, the Narcan me and my friends get from here has saved so many lives. I know of at least 20 people who were saved because of you.”

(A Rutland SSP Participant)

“I really wanted to thank you for signing me up with Better Life Partners because of you, I turned down heroin about a week ago from a buddy and took my suboxone instead.”

(A Rutland/BLP Participant)

“This organization, what you do here, is something really special. I have had a hard life, a really hard life in times where the biggest worries people knew to have were extremely limited. But, you do something special here. You are a rare sort, who sees the world and the people in it with compassion that is so rare these days, and in a place where fear is usually the number one factor. You’ve treated me with kindness and so much compassion, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you. Thank you for being here for me.”

(A Rutland Participant)

Additional information requested at the time of testimony regarding the other federal funds for VT CARES. I’m sorry I do not have access to the other agencies full budgets and funding sources. I am including what I believe about other agencies funding below as well.

Current funding VT CARES SSP:

- Funds from VDH- OD2A CDC Funds have paid for two SSP FTE Case Managers - that contract ends August 31, 2023, in the amount of \$100,000.
- Funds from DSU- SAMSHA Overdose Outreach pays for one SSP FTE – contract ends March 31, 2023, in the amount of \$100,000.
- Funds from DSU for our education & training work are ending on August 31st, in the amount of \$55,000.

These DSU training grant funds have helped us reach thousands of Vermont communities since the start of this contract four years ago. We have been providing free training/workshops on Overdose Prevention & Education, Harm Reduction Education, Anti-Stigma, and building strong community partnerships throughout Vermont. We also distribute naloxone and fentanyl test strips at these workshops.

We have engaged a wide range of stakeholders, medical providers, treatment and recovery groups, law enforcement, emergency services, community-based organizations, social service agencies, restorative justice centers, colleges, housing authorities and homeless shelters and of course people at risk with our free trainings, workshops, and presentations.

The addition of more staff through the OD2A and Overdose Outreach Pilot with DSU has been critical to our ability to expand access. We know we could do even more with additional staff but at a minimum it is essential to keep the existing staff we have.

The Overdose Outreach worker has been a successful new position which we are keeping and would like to hire one or two more people in similar roles in other regions. Bringing on staff with lived and living experience to work alongside peers is a unique and distinct way to connect with harder to reach community members who need harm reduction services. We would like to grow this model of peer outreach work in every county that we travel to and work in.

I do believe that all four of us get the DSU Overdose Outreach Worker grants. ASPVT also gets OD2A case management funds. Safe Recovery also gets the OD2A training grant.

List of recommendations from the Department of Health at the Opioid Settlement Committee meeting:

- Expanded Naloxone distribution.
- Fentanyl test strips
- Safe smoke kit Supplies
- Drug checking machines for SSPs
- Wound care telehealth and consultation
- Contingency management
- Opioid medication units
- Family engagement

- Outreach workers/Peer workers
- Recovery services in emergency departments